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And then you are left holding the baby! Strategic manoeuvring with the *argumentum ad consequentiam*

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ABSTRACT: In argumentative discourse fallacies occur regularly, but often they seem not to be noticed by the participants. In spite of the fact that people generally denounce this fallacy when confronted with clear case, this also goes for the fallacy known as the *argumentum ad consequentiam*. In explaining this paradox it is argued in this paper that certain types of *argumentum ad consequentiam* are modes of strategic manoeuvring which take on a reasonable appearance by mimicking legitimate pragmatic argumentation or *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation. In an experiment we tested the following hypothesis: fallacious *argumentum ad consequentiam* argumentation is regarded less unreasonable when it is presented in this way as reasonable pragmatic argumentation.

KEYWORDS: *argumentum ad consequentiam*, fallacy, hidden fallaciousness, Pragma-dialectics, pragmatic argumentation, strategic manoeuvring

1. INTRODUCTION

In a discussion with evolutionary biologist and fervent atheist Richard Dawkins, Wendy Wright, Chair of the conservative-Christian Concerned Women of America, defends creationism. She supports her standpoint that there is a loving “creator” as follows:

What people believe about how human beings are created shapes what they believe about human beings. And if we believe that human beings were created out of love, by a loving creator that has given each one of us not only a material body but also a spirit and a soul, we are more likely to treat others with respect and dignity.

Put briefly: there is a loving creator, because if we believe that we will treat others with more respect and dignity. In this way Wright tries to prove that something exists by pointing at the favourable consequences of that existence.

Something similar happened after the American rapper Kanye West had stated on 2 May 2018 in an interview with the American entertainment channel TMZ that as far as he is concerned slavery is a matter of choice:

When you hear that slavery lasted for 400 years. 400 years? That sounds like a choice.

Van Lathan of TMZ tackled him about these words:

You may think as you like, but your statements have world-wide consequences. While you are making music and lead the luxury life of an artist, we – the remainder of society – are still being marginalized by the consequences of 400 years of slavery.

Next West just repeated that slavery is a choice.

Both Wendy Wright and Van Lathan point at the effects of what is claimed in an assertion about a certain state of affairs ('there is a loving "creator"' and 'slavery is a choice' respectively). Their argumentation is based on the positive or negative consequences of what is asserted in the standpoint that is defended.¹ For this reason in both cases the fallacy is committed that is known as the *argumentum ad consequentiam*. In an *argumentum ad consequentiam* a non-legitimate step is made from a normative premise to a descriptive standpoint. An assertion about the existence or non-existence of a certain state of affairs is then defended by pointing at the positive or negative consequences that this state of affairs would have.

The *argumentum ad consequentiam* is not a fallacy we encounter daily. In discussions about religion and discrimination however this unreasonable argumentative move appears to occur regularly. In particular in situations in which speakers take refuge to "wishful thinking" the *ad consequentiam* fallacy can often be heard. Anthony Beevor, the British World War II historian, describes in this way the desperate statements of German soldiers after their defeat at Stalingrad:

Soviet intelligence officers, however, found their German prisoners still in a state of denial and confused logic at the possibility of defeat. "We have got to believe that Germany will win the war," said a Luftwaffe navigator from a JU 52 shot down on the Stalingrad run, "or what is the use of going on with it?" A soldier reflecting the same obstinacy: "If we lose the war we have nothing to hope for" (Beevor, 2012, p. 257).

In this kind of simple cases the unreasonable character of this argumentative move is clear immediately, even to laymen who have never heard of this fallacy. This has become clear in our empirical examination of reasonableness judgments of ordinary arguers (van Eemeren, Garssen & Meuffels, 2009). The results of this experimental research make clear that ordinary arguers judge the *argumentum ad consequentiam* as a very unreasonable fallacy (pp. 176-179). In our research we started from "clear cases". In the daily practice of argumentation however such fallacies will as a rule not manifest themselves so noticeably and revealing their unreasonable character will be more difficult. Therefore the question arises how it can be that in practice argumentation in which the *argumentum ad consequentiam* is committed is sometimes presented in such a way that it gets a more reasonable appearance. We will offer an explanation for this phenomenon and test this explanation subsequently in an experiment.

The research we are reporting about is part of a project named "Hidden Fallaciousness", in which we investigate how ordinary arguers manoeuvre strategically in order to give a less unreasonable appearance to the fallacies they commit. In earlier research conducted in this project we have examined how in practice the *argumentum ad hominem* and the *argumentum ad baculum* can be disguised or camouflaged (van Eemeren, Garssen and Meuffels, 2012, and van Eemeren, Garssen and Meuffels 2015, respectively). In our current contribution we shall first set forth the pragma-dialectical view of the *argumentum ad consequentiam*. After having paid attention to strategic manoeuvring with the *argumentum ad consequentiam* and discussing

¹ Van Lathan does not go into the factual correctness of West's assertion, but shifts the topic of discussion to the question of whether it is wise to make an assertion like that. In ordinary discussions such a shift occurs rather often.

two disguised manifestations of this fallacy we will report about an experiment that pertains to one of them.

2. TWO DISGUISED MANIFESTATIONS OF THE ARGUMENTUM AD CONSEQUENTIAM

In the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation fallacies are viewed as violations of rules for conducting a critical discussion. The *argumentum ad consequentiam* is one of the violations of the Argument Scheme Rule (Rule 8):

In case the defence does not take place by means of formally valid reasoning, standpoints may not be regarded as conclusively defended if the defence does not take place by means of appropriate argument schemes that are applied correctly (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 194).

The Argument Scheme Rule consists in fact of two parts: (1) the argument scheme must be suitable, and (2) the argument scheme must have been applied correctly.

An argument scheme, the central notion in this rule, characterizes the way in which the acceptability of the reason advanced is transferred to the standpoint defended. The suitability of the argument scheme is an intersubjective matter in the sense that in principle the protagonist and the antagonist agree (or are supposed to have agreed) in the opening stage of a critical discussion which argument schemes may be applied. Some argument schemes are by definition unsuitable or do not lend themselves for being used in certain contexts. The structural unsuitability of an argument scheme can, for instance, be due to an inadequate combination of the type of standpoint that is defended and the reason that is advanced in its support. This is the case when an *argumentum ad consequentiam* is used, because a normative reason is then supposed to justify a descriptive standpoint (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 162).

Whether an argument scheme that is judged appropriate is also correctly applied is in the testing procedure determined by means of critical questions that are associated with the argument scheme concerned and the protagonist's responses to these questions. From the fact that no critical questions can be sensibly associated with the *argumentum ad consequentiam* it already clear that this is an argument scheme that is inherently inappropriate as a reasonable means of defence.

The *argumentum ad consequentiam* is an inappropriate argument scheme due to the combination of a descriptive standpoint and a normative reason, which makes it impossible to have a transfer of acceptability from the reason to the standpoint. The acceptability of a descriptive standpoint is in all cases independent of the value that is attributed to the consequences of having that standpoint. The question now is how it can be explained that a mode of argumentation that is clearly unreasonable can still be used with some success in the discussion. Why would participants in a discussion openly pose as unreasonable in this way? The answer to this question can be found in the extended pragma-dialectical theory, in which the strategic manoeuvring that takes place in argumentative discourse is taken into account (van Eemeren, 2010).

In their pursuit of effectiveness participants in a discussion will try to manoeuvre strategically in such a way that they can realize their dialectical goal by means of their contributions to the discussion by complying with the rules for critical discussion while they are trying at the same time to achieve their rhetorical aim of getting their standpoint accepted by the other party. In balancing between dialectical reasonableness on the one hand and rhetorical effectiveness on the other hand in order to realize these two (sometimes seemingly

incompatible) aims at the same time, the participants in a discussion make use of strategic manoeuvring (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 40).

In itself there is nothing wrong with the participants' zeal to win the discussion, but when achieving this aim gets the upper hand this can lead to an unrestrained pursuit of effectiveness which results in the abandonment of a party's commitment to a reasonable exchange and thus in a derailment of the strategic manoeuvring. Viewed in this perspective, fallacies are derailments of strategic manoeuvring which involve a violation of the rules for conducting a critical discussion. By violating the rules for critical discussion, such argumentative moves obstruct or frustrate the process of resolving a difference of opinion on the merits, so that these strategic manoeuvres must be characterized as fallacious.

Derailments of strategic manoeuvring can easily escape from being noticed by the participants in a discussion because in ordinary argumentative practice deviations from the rules for critical discussion may be hard to detect. None of the parties will be inclined to manifest itself openly ("on the record") as an unreasonable person – if only because this would make their contribution completely ineffective. Therefore: [...] arguers will most likely try to stick to the established dialectical means for achieving rhetorical objectives which are possibly at odds with the dialectical rationale for a certain discussion rule, and "stretch" the use of these means so much that the fallacious maneuvering is also covered (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 140).

As a consequence of exploiting the dialectically appropriate means by "stretching" their applicability in order to achieve the arguer's rhetorical aims, derailments of strategic manoeuvring may in certain cases strongly resemble reasonable strategic manoeuvres. For this reason it will in everyday discussions not always be crystal clear where exactly the boundary between reasonable and fallacious needs to be drawn. Put differently: the distinction between reasonable strategic manoeuvring and fallacious strategic manoeuvring is often not simply a matter of black and white. The various modes of strategic manoeuvring that can be distinguished in ordinary argumentative practices often cover a continuum that goes from evidently fallacious to evidently reasonable variants (van Eemeren, Garssen & Meuffels, 2015). This also applies to the *argumentum ad consequentiam*.

Several variants of the *argumentum ad consequentiam* prove to be strikingly similar to modes of strategic manoeuvring in which a standpoint is defended in a reasonable way by pointing at its consequences. There is, for instance, a variant of the *argumentum ad consequentiam* which resembles in its appearance pragmatic argumentation and there is also a variant which has a great many points in common with the argument form known as *reductio ad absurdum* (Garssen, 2006).

This is an example of *ad consequentiam* argumentation that resembles pragmatic argumentation:

This research concerning differences in intelligence between different races cannot be right because its results will lead to the discrimination of certain groups of people.

In the pragma-dialectical typology of argument schemes pragmatic argumentation, a sub-category of causal argumentation, is schematized as follows:

1 Standpoint: Action X should be carried out
1.1 Because: Action X leads to positive result Y
(1.1') (And: If action X leads to a positive result such as Y, it must be carried out)
(van Eemeren, 2017, 23)

The *argumentum ad consequentiam* resembles pragmatic argumentation because of two common features: the hypothetical causal claim and the negative or positive valuation that is

attached to the claimed consequence. In the *argumentum ad consequentiam* as well as in pragmatic argumentation the argument boils down to a prediction that what is mentioned in the standpoint will have a positive or negative effect.

As a matter of course, there are also differences. While in pragmatic argumentation a prescriptive (inciting) standpoint is defended, the standpoint is in the *argumentum ad consequentiam* always descriptive. It is the prescriptive nature of the standpoint that makes it possible for pragmatic argumentation to be sound whereas *ad consequentiam* argumentation is *qualitate qua* fallacious. When *ad consequentiam* argumentation manifests itself in a similar way as pragmatic argumentation, it can therefore be viewed as a derailment of the use of pragmatic argumentation: the arguer who commits this fallacy goes too far in the strategic manoeuvring of by changing the initially descriptive standpoint into a prescriptive standpoint.

The second disguised variant of *ad consequentiam* argumentation does not resemble pragmatic argumentation but is more like a specific application of the formal-logical argument form of *modus tollens* known as *reductio ad absurdum* or the *ad absurdum* argument. This is an invented example of such an *ad consequentiam* argumentation:

Evolutionism cannot be right
 Because according to evolutionism we would be descendants of the apes
 And that would be a horrible idea.

The following is an example of a non-fallacious application of *ad absurdum* argumentation:

Evolutionism cannot be right
 Because according to evolutionism we would be descendants of the apes
 And genetic research shows that this is certainly not the case.²

What is striking when we compare *ad consequentiam* argumentation and *ad absurdum* argumentation is that it is not the standpoint that differs – this is in both cases descriptive – but only the last premise. In the non-fallacious *ad absurdum* variant this premise is a descriptive statement, whereas in the case of the *ad consequentiam* it is evaluative.

Table 1 portrays the two variants of the *argumentum ad consequentiam* and their reasonable counterparts:

Pragmatic argumentation	<i>Ad consequentiam I</i>
Standpoint: X should be carried out <i>because</i> X leads to positive consequence Y <i>(and</i> If X leads to consequences of type Y, then X should be carried out)	Standpoint: X is true <i>because</i> X leads to positive consequence Y <i>(and</i> If X leads to consequence of type Y, then X is true)

² The last premise is not in agreement with the current state of affairs in science, but in this invented example the reasoning is valid.

<i>Reductio ad absurdum</i>	<i>Ad consequentiam II</i>
Standpoint: X is true <i>because</i> If X is not true, then Y is true <i>and</i> Y is not true	Standpoint: X is true <i>because</i> If X is not true, then Y is true <i>and</i> Y is not desirable

Table 1: Comparison of the pragmatic argument scheme and the pragmatic variant of the *argumentum ad consequentiam* (*ad consequentiam I*) and *reductio ad absurdum* and the *ad absurdum* variant of the *argumentum ad consequentiam* (*ad consequentiam II*)

These two variants of the *argumentum ad consequentiam* have both been examined in our extensive research of the conventional validity of the pragma-dialectical rules for critical discussion (van Eemeren, Garssen & Meuffels, 2009). The results showed that the two variants were both judged to be very unreasonable by ordinary arguers (pp. 176-179).

The fact that the *ad consequentiam* fallacy resembles certain reasonable counterparts in its appearance already offers a first explanation for the potential problems involved in identifying this fallacy in argumentative practice. The speaker who is guilty of an *ad consequentiam* can make the fallacy less easily identifiable by using specific presentational means that make it look the same as its reasonable counterpart (Garssen 2016, p. 251). What happens in fact is that a confusing ambiguity is created by leaving room for two possible interpretations: a reasonable one and an unreasonable one. In cases where there is no indication that this is not justified, ordinary arguers will start from the presumption of reasonableness and opt for the reasonable interpretation.

In the case of the pragmatic *ad consequentiam* variant it is pretended that the standpoint is not descriptive but prescriptive/inciting. In strategic manoeuvring with this variant directed at disguising this manipulation, it is a question of presenting the standpoint in such a way that it can be interpreted as a descriptive as well as a prescriptive statement. In the next example, J. Wiese, an “alternative” medical doctor adhering to the “Moerman method”, phrases his standpoint in such a way that both interpretation are possible:

It is a careless way of expressing oneself to say that cancer is mainly a matter of uncontrollable cell growth which can only be stopped by quasi-heroic interventions of doctors. To put it more strongly: this is even untruthful, because this unproven theory takes away the patient’s confidence in his self-curing powers, which can destruct the cancer from the inside (van Eemeren & Snoeck Henkemans, 2011, p. 201).

Because of the phrasing “it is a careless way of expressing oneself” the standpoint can be interpreted in two ways: “cancer is not mainly a matter of uncontrollable cell growth” and “it is not a careful way of expressing oneself to say that ...” When we interpret the standpoint in the first way, the argument that expressing this view leads to undesirable consequences results in an *ad consequentiam* fallacy. When the standpoint is interpreted in a prescriptive way, reasonable pragmatic argumentation agrees with it. However, because the speaker also uses the qualification “untruthful”, the descriptive interpretation seems in fact to be the most likely one. These problems of interpretation are only caused by the ambiguous phrasing of the standpoint, which makes it difficult to detect the *ad consequentiam* fallacy immediately.

To make the pragmatic variant of the *ad consequentiam* harder to recognize, it is, as we have just shown, instrumental to phrase the standpoint in an ambiguous way. This can be achieved, for instance, by means of phrasings such as *x should (not) be seen as y* or *x should*

(not) be regarded as *y*. In the example we just discussed the phrasing could also have been: *cancer is not to be seen as a matter of uncontrollable cell growth* (ambiguous formulation) instead of *cancer is not a matter of uncontrollable cell growth* (non-ambiguous formulation).

It should be noticed that by using this variant in fact more fallacies are committed at the same time. By the unclear phrasing of the standpoint the speaker violates Rule 10 of the code of conduct for reasonable discussions: the Language Use (or Usage) Rule. If it was clear that the speaker has a descriptive standpoint and now he seems all of a sudden to defend a prescriptive standpoint, Rule 3, the Standpoint Rule, is also violated, because then the speaker readjusts the initial standpoint.³

Using the *ad absurdum* variant of the *ad consequentiam* fallacy does not involve a manipulation of the standpoint but a manipulation of the nature of the reason that is advanced in the argumentation. Whereas it is asserted in its reasonable counterpart that the consequence of what is said in the standpoint is untrue, in the *ad absurdum* variant of the *ad consequentiam* it is said that the consequence of what is said in the standpoint is undesirable. In the speaker's strategic manoeuvring phrasings can therefore be chosen that allow for both interpretations (untrue and undesirable). As we can illustrate by re-using an earlier example, this can, for instance, happen by making use of the word "absurd":

Evolutionism cannot be true
Because if that theory were true, we would be descendants of the apes
And that is absurd.

Here the use of "absurd" ensures the ambiguity that is aimed for because it can mean both "that idea is untrue" and "that idea is awful" (Garssen, 2016, p. 251)

In short, in the use of both variants an effort can be made to make the *ad consequentiam* fallacy less conspicuous by sowing doubt about what is the right interpretation.

3. THE EXPERIMENT

In our experiment we have concentrated on the pragmatic variant of the *argumentum ad consequentiam*; we will report later about the results of our research concerning the *ad absurdum* variant. We have tested the following hypothesis: *ad consequentiam* fallacies will be judged as less unreasonable when they are committed in argumentation in which the initial standpoint is presented as prescriptive. In total 35 discussion fragments were presented to the respondents; some of them contained fallacies, other fragments did not. For each fragment the respondents had to indicate on a 7 point Likert type scale how (un)reasonable they judged the last contribution to the discussion to be. The scale varied from 'very unreasonable' (= 1) to 'very reasonable' (= 7).

3.1 Material

In the 35 constructed discussion fragments 7 different types of fallacious and non-fallacious contributions were included, each of them represented by 5 items:

- (1) moves that are openly *ad consequentiam*
- (2) disguised *ad consequentiam* moves of the pragmatic type
- (3) sound moves containing pragmatic argumentation

³ Strictly speaking there not really a violation of the Standpoint Rule because the speaker leaves it a question which interpretation of his unclearly phrased standpoint we have to choose.

- (4) sound moves containing other types of argumentation
- (5) moves containing the circumstantial variant van the *ad hominem* fallacy
- (6) moves containing the *tu quoque* variant of the *ad hominem* fallacy
- (7) moves containing the *abusive* variant of the *ad hominem* fallacy.

All 35 discussion fragments were structured in the same way: they existed of three speaking turns in an exchange between 2 persons. Every fragment was preceded by a short description of the context. This description always made clear which standpoint occasioned the discussion. In the case of the *ad consequentiam* fallacies this standpoint is always descriptive.

Just like in our earlier empirical research concerning the (un)reasonableness of fallacies, charged subjects were avoided. In the first turn the protagonist advances a standpoint. In the items containing the disguised *ad consequentiam*s the ambiguous phrasing also allows for a prescriptive interpretation of the standpoint. In the second turn the antagonist makes explicitly or implicitly clear that the standpoint is not accepted. In the third turn the protagonist provides a reason for accepting the standpoint.

An example of an item with a disguised *ad consequentiam* fallacy is the following:

Sanne and Alex are having a discussion about the question whether men are more rational than women.

Sanne: Rationality and analytic capability cannot be seen as male properties.

Alex: Why not?

Sanne: If we saw it like that, we would give men unintentionally and advantage in applications and getting promotion.

It is clear from the description of the context given in italics that a descriptive standpoint is discussed. Sanne's formulation of the standpoint in the first turn makes it ambiguous; it could also be interpreted as a prescriptive standpoint.

The following is an example of an openly expressed *ad consequentiam* fallacy:

Lisa and Yvon are discussing the future of life on earth.

Lisa: It is plausible that the sun will never stop functioning.

Yvon: Why?

Lisa: Otherwise life on earth would become impossible, wouldn't it?

In this item the standpoint is not ambiguous and cannot be interpreted as prescriptive. This makes the argumentation used in this type of item an openly expressed *ad consequentiam*.

The additional items of type (5), (6) and (7) have a double function. They serve in the first place as "fillers", which are meant to obscure the true nature of the experiment: it should not become clear to the respondents that we were only out to get their judgments on the *ad consequentiam* fallacies. In the second place, as we will explain in Section 3.3, these items serve as *gate-keepers* for the reliability of the experiment.

3.2 Respondents

31 adult volunteers took part in the research, which were selected by students Language and Communication of the University of Amsterdam. All respondents were 18 years old or older and they had not received any education about argumentation theory. The questionnaire was presented in writing. There was only a short written instruction; no further oral instruction was

offered. There were no indications that the respondents did not understand the explanations that were given to them. The test instructors did not know which hypothesis was tested.

3.3 Results

The results for the three fillers included in Table 2 agree as far as reasonableness is concerned with the results we found repeatedly in the project *Conceptions of Reasonableness*. Again, the *abusive* fallacy is seen as the most unreasonable argumentative move. Next comes the *circumstantial* attack and finally the *tu quoque* variant. Again, the latter two types of fallacies tend to score around the neutral middle of the 7 point scale. The reasonableness scores for the 3 types of fillers prove to be a good indication of the reliability of the experiment. In addition, the judgments concerning the unreasonableness of openly presented *ad consequentiam* fallacies and the judgments concerning the reasonableness of sound argumentation are completely in agreement with our findings in the *Conceptions of Reasonableness* project.

Type of fallacy	Reasonableness score
<i>Ad hominem abusive</i>	2.9 (0.8)
<i>Ad hominem tu quoque</i>	4.1 (1.2)
<i>Ad hominem circumstantial</i>	3.5 (0.7)

Table 2: Average reasonableness scores for the three filler items

Do our respondents – as predicted in our hypothesis – indeed regard the disguised *ad consequentiam* moves as less unreasonable than the openly expressed, ‘clear-cut’ cases of the *ad consequentiam* fallacy? The relevant data are recorded in Table 3.

Pragmatically reasonable	5.58 (0.9)
Reasonable	5.10 (0.6)
<i>Ad consequentiam</i> openly	2.10 (1.2)
<i>Ad consequentiam</i> disguised	3.13 (1.4)

Table 3: Average reasonableness scores for the experimental items

The average reasonableness scores for the four types of argumentative moves appear – as expected – to differ from each other in a statistically significant sense: $F(2,36) = 35.21, p < .01; \eta^2 = .48$.⁴ With the help of an orthogonal *post hoc* comparison we have contrasted the openly expressed *ad consequentiam* fallacy and the disguised *ad consequentiam* fallacy with each other (for our purposes the most important comparison). The disguised *ad consequentiam* fallacy was indeed considered less unreasonable than the openly expressed *ad consequentiam* fallacy: $F(1,36) = 17.31, p < .01$. In absolute terms the respondents still consider the disguised *ad consequentiam* unreasonable, but 1 point more reasonable than the *clear cases*. This experiment therefore provides no grounds for rejecting our hypothesis.

⁴ The data were analysed with the help of a multivariate analysis of variance (‘mixed model’ approach for repeated measurements), with ‘respondent’ and ‘instantiation’ as *random* factors and the variable ‘type of fallacy’ as a fixed factor. The *random* factor ‘instantiation’ is nested in the levels of the fixed factor ‘type of fallacy’, while the *random* factor ‘respondent’ is fully crossed with the *random* factor ‘instantiation’ and the fixed factor ‘type of fallacy’. The statistical consequence of this design is that – instead of ordinary F-ratios – so-called *quasi* F-ratios must be calculated (noted as F’), while the accompanying degrees of freedom must be approximated (cf. Clark, 1973).

4. CONCLUSION

The mode of strategic manoeuvring we have examined in this experiment is complex. In order to camouflage the unreasonableness of the pragmatic variant of the *argumentum ad consequentiam* and to make it resemble reasonable pragmatic argumentation more closely, another fallacy needs to be committed: the fallacy of changing the initial standpoint. Doing so involves committing at the same time a third fallacy: the ambiguity fallacy. All the same our research concerning strategic manoeuvring with the *ad consequentiam* fallacy shows indeed certain effects. When it is disguised as pragmatic argumentation the *ad consequentiam* fallacy is judged less unreasonable, even though this disguised fallacy is still regarded unreasonable.

The *ad absurdum* variant of the *ad consequentiam* fallacy was not included in this experiment. The camouflaging by means of this variant will be examined in our next research in the “Hidden Fallaciousness” project.

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